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ABSTRACT

Since 1980, an increasing number of state and local education agencies have reintroduced a world history requirement into their secondary curricula. This ERIC Digest examines five key questions related to that trend. Questions raised, together with some salient points made in the discussion of each, are as follows: (1) What is the background to current debates about curriculum reform in world history? The current confusion about world history courses reflects conflicting curricula traditions and the lack of a uniform image of what world history is or should be. (2) Should teachers emphasize the history of the West or of the world? Although U.S. society is based in the Western experience, citizens no longer live in a world dominated by the West. (3) Should social or political history be emphasized in the curriculum? While the different perspectives of social or political history may lead to divergent approaches, they should be viewed as complementary possibilities for the teacher to explore. (4) Should world history teachers use the survey approach? Major elements of a chronological survey can be treated thematically, but in a chronological order, thus linking together historical periods while encouraging historical thinking skills. (5) Should world history be taught in a single year? A multi-year world history sequence is an ideal, but it may be difficult to implement. A list of nine references on issues related to the world history curriculum concludes the digest. (PPB)

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WORLD HISTORY IN THE SECONDARY SCHOOL CURRICULUM

ERIC DIGEST EDO-SO-89-7

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World History in the Secondary School Curriculum

by Robert B. Woyach

Since 1980, an increasing number of state and local education agencies have reintroduced a world history requirement into their secondary curricula. These mandates have raised important questions about the nature of such a course and its role in the curriculum. This ERIC Digest looks at some of the key questions in the debate over world history. It examines (1) the background for issues of curriculum reform in world history, (2) the choice between Western and "world" history, (3) the trend toward social history, (4) the viability of the traditional historical survey, and (5) the issue of whether world history should be taught over more than one year.

What Is the Background to Current Debates about Curriculum Reform in World History? In 1963, world history was the second most commonly taken high school social studies course. Although called "world" history, the course dealt almost exclusively with Western political history, typically a chronological survey of the actions and contributions of great men.

By the mid-1970s, world history had fallen from favor. Most states and local school districts had dropped this decades-old requirement to give students greater academic freedom. Many schools offered alternative "world studies" courses, usually based on cultural geography.

The standard world history course also changed. By the end of the decade, more attention was being given to social history and the non-Western world. As a result, the threads of the old political survey were frayed. The course seemed to be a mish-mash of conflicting goals and unrelated content.

The movement toward academic rigor in the early 1980s gave new impetus to world history. The easiest way for most schools to respond to outside pressure was to re-establish the world history requirement. Today states as diverse as Kentucky, New Jersey, Arkansas, and Oregon have some kind of tenth-grade world studies requirement. But the shape of that course differs greatly from one place to another. The once uniform image of "world history" no longer exists.

The current confusion about world history courses reflects conflicting beliefs about the kind of history we should teach. The debate focuses on the place of non-Western history, the importance of social history, and the value of the continuous chronological survey.

Should Teachers Emphasize the History of the West or of the World? The world history that emerged during the 1970s was not a "world" history at all. It was a poorly integrated amalgam of regional histories fitted uncomfortably into the chronology of the West. As a result, the added material exacerbated age-old problems of coverage. By the mid-1980s, many observers recognized the need for a better conceptualization (Alder and Downey 1985).

In part because of the lack of an agreed-upon, integrated view of "world" history, there has been a renewed support for the teaching of Western civilization in recent years. The appeal of the Western civilization approach lies in its familiarity. The majority of American political and social institutions also find their origins in the Western experience (Gordon 1989; Gagnon 1987). Some curriculum reformers have gone further, arguing that students must know their own culture before they can appreciate other cultures.

On the other side are those who argue that a changing world requires that students have a broader experience than the Western civilization course can provide. We live in a world no longer dominated by the West. Increased immigration from Asia and Latin America has added new sources of diversity to culture in the United States. To the extent that the study of Western civilization encourages a narrow ethnocentrism, it may prove dysfunctional in preparing students for life in the future.

The debate over Western versus world history may have become overly polarized. Historian Michael Gordon argues that Western history must be seen in the context of world history. For better or worse, the West has given impetus to the modern world. Thus Western history must play a central role in any meaningful approach to modern world history.

Should Social or Political History Be Emphasized in the Curriculum? The addition of material on women, minorities, and non-governmental affairs during the 1970s fit a general movement to make world history more relevant. It also coincided with the trend toward social history. New historical studies looked at the role of women in the Middle Ages and the French Revolution. The industrial and scientific revolutions became as, or more, important a focus for study as the political revolutions, wars, and alliances of the old political history.

While social history may have made world history more relevant, it also has made it more complex. Paul Gagnon (1987) notes that the trend toward social history threatens a key goal of the course: to help students appreciate the struggle for democracy. As the goals of world history multiply, the ability of the course to address any one of them adequately declines.

Gagnon's point is well taken, especially given the general importance of citizenship education in American schooling. At the same time, the distinction between social and political history may be overdrawn. Political history has traditionally been defined in

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terms of the progression of dynasties and regimes, wars, and the policies of governments. However, true political history cannot be bounded in this way. The rise of democracy—the democratic revolution in broad terms—is not simply the story of governmental institutions, laws, and documents. It is the story of ideas, and of institutions such as slavery. It encompasses workers' rights, civil rights, and women's rights—fought not only in the governmental arena but in the social and economic arenas as well.

Likewise, the key processes of political history play themselves out in societies as a whole. The French Revolution, for example, can be looked at from the perspective of kings and conventions. It can also be looked at from the viewpoint of common people. In both cases, the lessons can be the same, but the latter perspective may be more meaningful to students.

Should World History Teachers Use the Survey Approach? History is traditionally equated with the continuous chronological survey. Matthew T. Downey (1985, 11) summarizes the typical viewpoint:

> The people and events of the past can only be understood when viewed within the larger context in which they existed. That is not possible when historical events or topics are isolated and extracted from the web of historic time to serve some other curricular purpose. The value of history also depends upon the chronological presentation of events through time. It is only through a chronological survey that students can begin to understand the process of social and cultural change, which is one of the principal purposes of history.

Actually chronology operates at different levels in history. The different levels can be thought of in terms of a complex chain. At the most basic level, the chain is made up of links, each of which is a distinct "story." Many links, hooked together, constitute strands that are "stories" in their own right. The rise of democratic institutions is one such strand. These strands, twisted together, make up a still larger story—the story of world history.

Ideally, in a survey course, students understand the links, the strands, and the chain as a whole. It is only in seeing the strands and the chain that students really see the "process of social and cultural change." Unfortunately, research on historical learning raises serious questions about our ability to achieve this ideal. Because of the emphasis on coverage and memorization that survey courses encourage, real historical thinking skills are generally not taught (Downey and Levstik 1988). The larger stories that give meaning to history also tend to be neglected.

World history can be taught both discontinuously and chronologically. Reilly (1989) outlines one approach to a discontinuous history survey. Similarly, some major elements of a chronological survey (e.g., the urban revolution, the Age of Rome, the Industrial Revolution) could be treated thematically, but in chronological order. Such a course would not pretend to tell all of "world history" but may well achieve the ideal: a more than superficial understanding of some of the major turning points of the past.

Should World History Be Taught in a Single Year? In recent years, recommendations for history reform have called for the teaching of world history over more than one year. The Bradley Commission (1988) outlined four possible sequences for world history, each involving at least two years of instruction. In their assessment of history learning, Ravitch and Finn (1987) point to the new California Social Studies Framework, which mandates world history at the sixth, seventh, and tenth grades.

Teaching world history over multiple years is an ideal, but it may be difficult to implement. The California framework is based on assumptions about the capacities of sixth- and seventh-grade students to retain a knowledge of ancient and medieval history to provide a basis for learning modern history in the tenth grade. Most of the Bradley Commission's suggestions, alternatively, place world history (or a combination of world and Western history) in ninth and tenth grade. Here the major question is whether schools, faced with budgetary constraints, will implement a two-year history sequence, or simply break world history into a multi-course sequence and require students to take one course. The latter option would hardly achieve the historical survey presumed to be necessary.

A multi-year world history sequence will soon become as full and as frustrating as a single-year course, if it is taught with the same emphasis on facts and coverage. In short, no matter the time devoted to world history, we cannot escape the question of what kind of history to teach and what priorities to have in selecting and treating content.

References and ERIC Resources

The following list of resources includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are in the ERIC system and are available in microfiche and paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 3900 Wheeler Avenue, Alexandria, Virginia 22304; telephone numbers are 703-823-0500 and 800-227-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number are annotated monthly in CIJE (CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION), which is available in most libraries. EJ documents are not available through EDRS; however, they can be located in the journal section of most libraries by using the bibliographic information provided below.

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